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AUTHOR Cutbirth, Craig W.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Hypothesizing that the way in which the media present information influence their audiences' reaction to it, a study examined 158 economy-related news stories broadcast between September 15 and October 31, 1980, by the three major television networks: ABC, NBC, and CBS. Analysis was guided by three questions: To what degree was economic information presented as related to the 1980 presidential election? Was the link provided by the network or was it part of the content? and Was the campaign frame presented in an ethical manner? The study found that networks used a double (campaign--economy) frame between 15% and 20% of the time. In these doubleframes, ABC itself presented the campaign link 7 of 8 times, NBC--7 of 10, and CBS--6 of 11. Analyzing whether the economic information reported or denigrated a particular candidate, the study reported 4 ethical violations in ABC's 8 dual frames, 4 in NBC's 10 frames, and only 2 in CBS's 11 frames. (MM)

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THE ETHICS OF MEDIA FRAMING OF ISSUES IN THE 1980 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

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Craig W. Cutbirth
Illinois State University

Mitchell E. Shapiro
University of Miami

Wenmouth Williams, Jr.
Illinois State University

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Communication theorists recognize that the reception of messages is a subjective process. Stimuli are not passively internalized by mechanistic receptors but are actively selected, organized, and interpreted by human receivers. The subjectivity and activity of message reception leads inevitably to a degree of distortion or misunderstanding of messages. Because meaning is a product of creation rather than extraction, understanding is in part a function of the person receiving the stimulus. This contributes to the somewhat common occurence in which two or more receivers attach different meanings to the same symbols.

Recognition of this situation has naturally led to the development of techniques to influence the way the mind functions in its information processing task. Some techniques are designed to aid in the clear understanding of communicative stimuli while others work to create a false comprehension. Communication artifacts are subjected to on-going analysis and evaluation as researchers scramble to uncover the latest attempts at the creation of national groupthink. Such analysis has historically been directed at overt attempts at persuasion - oratory, advertising, rallies, and other situations in which the audience is aware of the hortatory intent of the messages they receive. In recent years, keeping with the expanded focus of the communication discipline, observers have come to realize that influence may occur in less obvious contexts. Theorists such as Burke, Richards, and Weaver have

advanced the view that any use of language is to some degree rhetorical.[1] One may legitimately question whether communication ever functions in a strictly informative mode.

Much of the recent analysis of information dispersal in contemporary society has been directed at the mass electronic and print media; quantitatively the most significant sources of information available to the public at large. One sub-set of study has embraced the presentation of political information by the media, particularly information relating to presidential election campaigns. The importance of the information presented within this context, coupled with the drama of the presidential election itself, leads to a substantial media effort to provide up-to-date information to the public.

An accepted approach to media coverage of presidential campaigns is the study of the agenda setting effect of the media. Inaugurated by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, agenda setting research suggests that because the media are unable to provide quantitatively equal coverage of all matters pertaining to a campaign, issues are prioritized by the amount of time and space afforded them. Those issues given the greatest coverage will tend to be perceived by the audience as being of greatest importance, therefore establishing an agenda.

Our task in this paper is to extend aganda setting analysis in a more qualitative manner. Building on previous

analysis of media and audience agendas in the 1980 presidential campaign,[2] we propose an extensive examination of news coverage of what was arguably the most significant issue in that campaign, the state of the economy.

The thesis of this paper is that as the media present information they are afforded an opportunity to influence the manner in which their audience processes and reacts to the information. As Edelman notes, "Every symbol stands for something other than itself, and it also evokes an attitude, a set of impressions, or a pattern of events associated through time, through space, through logic, or through imagination with the symbol."[3] We realize, of course, that this position is a departure from the original McCombs and Shaw belief that agenda setting is restricted to salience rather than direction or intensity of attitude.[4] We make this departure on the basis of the development of awareness that the media presents information within a series of frames or contexts.

The concept of framing can best be understood in terms of an early study of perceptions of the MacArthur parade in Chicago during the Korean War. One group of observers watched the parade in person, directly experiencing the event. A second group viewed the event on television. Questions pertaining to perceptions of the parade revealed many differences between the two groups.[5] Obviously, how an event is portrayed affects how we perceive it.

Framing also applies to how we perceive and process information received from the media. One television viewer may admire Archie Bunker because he exemplifies a favored stereotype while another may believe him a bigot and laugh at his antics and interpersonal relationships with his friends and family. In terms of news, stories on Saudi Arabia can receive a foreign policy frame, an energy frame, or both frames. If it is framed as foreign policy we tend to think about it in terms of our relations with other countries. If the same story receives an energy frame, we may think of it in terms of gasoline prices.

Framing, then, is a perspective or point of view. We all engage in activities and evaluate them based on our point of reference. Framing is a function of our cognitive and affective structures. We evaluate information learned from the news media in terms of what we know and what we feel.

The political campaign context presents the media with conflicting or competing frames. One frame is the standard category for a story or issue. Using the example above, a story on Saudi Arabia may be communicated in a foreign policy frame, dictated by the content of the story. The second frame is the campaign. Here the viewer must be concerned with the relevance of the issue on Saudi Arabia to the campaign. Sometimes the news media will make the link to the campaign and at other times the audience must make the link.

Most agenda setting researchers have assumed that the news audiences can and do make at least covert linkages between the events of the day communicated within their standard frames and political campaigns.

Our analysis of media framing in the 1980 presidential campaign is pointed specifically toward the ethics of the framing process. Our evaluation here is guided by the standard belief that the proper function of news reporting is to convey information. As Arthur Vidich has commented, "Instead of formulating its own political objectives," the media pursues "an ideology of 'disinterested objectivity,' implying that 'this is the way it is,' or 'we present the news from nobody's point of view.'"[6]

Pursuant to our study we have examined recordings of every network (ABC, CBS, and NBC) television newscast presented between September 15 and October 31, 1980, the period of maximum media campaign coverage. Particular attention was directed at the presentation of information which would, in a non-election year, receive an economic frame.[7] In examining network news presentation of this information our analysis was guided by three questions. First, we sought to discover the degree to which economic information was framed jointly as economic-campaign information. Second, when the dual frame was presented we questioned whether the link was provided by the network itself or was part of the content being reported. Finally, and dealing again with the joint economic-campaign frame, we attempted to discover if the framing was presented

in an ethical manner.

ECONOMIC INFORMATION AND CAMPAIGN FRAMING

The status of the economy received extensive coverage throughout the period scrutinized in this study. Our initial analysis of network news information was conducted using 136 content categories. A story could be separated into more than one category depending on the number of issues the story contained. A story on events in the Middle East and how they might affect U.S. oil supplies, for example, would be coded both as a Middle East issue and as an energy issue. The 136 original issues were collapsed into twelve overall categories with reliability of coding assured by consensus between the two coders. Economic information was contained in two of these categories, inflation and jobs.

The thirty-five days of news coverage examined in this analysis produced a total of 158 stories coded as pertaining to the economy. (See Appendix A.) CBS discussed the economy 64 times while NBC and ABC presented economic information 49 and 45 times, respectively. The great majority of these stories were given a single economic frame. CBS doubled its frame on only 11 stories. ABC combined economic information with the campaign 7 times. NBC evoked the dual frame 10 times.

Looking at the coverage over time reveals an interesting but not unexpected pattern of repitition. On only five occasions did a network cover an economic story that was not also

covered by at least one other network. On 17 occasions each of the networks provided economic news to their viewers. Nearly half of this latter figure was concentrated in two five-day news periods; September 29-October 3, and October 27-31. A great degree of the dual framing of economic issues occurred in this initial five-day news period.

SOURCES OF DUAL FRAMING

On the occasions when economic information was given a campaign frame the dual link was nearly always provided by the networks, as seen in Table 1. In determining the source of dual framing we considered whether the network itself informed viewers of the link between economic information and the campaign or whether the network reported another source which linked the two together.

TABLE 1

Network	# Dual Issues	# Informed	# Reported
ABC	8	7	1
CBS	11	6	5
NBC	10	7	3

Network linkage was accomplished in two ways. First, the networks could obviously and overtly link the two together, stating that such and such information had an impact on the campaign. Second, the networks could imply the link by providing reactions to the information from the candidates.

THE ETHICS OF MEDIA FRAMING

The most difficult task of this study is evaluating the manner in which the network news media completed and explained the dual economic-campaign frame. Our general standard of evaluation has previously been introduced. In applying the "objectivity" test, however, we felt it necessary to develop more specific constructs. First, we looked to the balance of the campaign coverage. When economic information was linked to the campaign the media could make the link in a manner which favored or denigrated a particular candidate. One example of this is found in the ABC news coverage on September 24 regarding the potential impact of the Iran-Iraq conflict on U.S. oil supplies. An ABC correspondent concluded, "The result could be increase after increase in the amount we pay for gasoline, heating oil, and all petroleum products." The anchor then linked the information to the campaign and introduced a segment in which Ronald Reagan attacked Jimmy Carter's defense policies on the grounds that the country was too weak to do anything but stay neutral in the conflict.[8] The implication, of course, is that Carter would be unable to prevent the increases in the cost of petroleum products. The coverage provided no Carter defense of either his Middle East or defense policies. We consider it imbalanced.

On September 30, CBS news reported on Carter's plan to aid the steel industry. A correspondent's report on reaction

to the proposal noted "and though the steel aid package will extend unemployment benefits, some laid off workers were suspicious of the President's motives." The report then provided two examples of suspicious workers. A male commented, "I'd say it's just to help him along on his political campaign." A female worker complained, "We have to eat. The cost of living is very high and I just don't see how we're going to make it without work." The report concluded, "Economists agree the steel aid plan is a band-aid on a major wound."[9] As in the previous example, no Carter explanation of the program was provided.

More balanced coverage was accomplished by NBC news on September 26. A report on a Senate vote to withold funds for the Russian grain embargo featured film of a Senator claiming it as a clear victory for the Reagan philosophy and a White House official who dismissed it as pure politics.[10] Here the voters were left to decide which view, if either, was correct.

Our second ethical construct involves the masking of opinion as information. If the media is to function as a conveyor of information then opinion and commentary must be designated as such. Instances of media commenting on a story while purporting to report the story fell short of meeting this standard. Indeed, the dual frames which originated in the media may also provide examples of violating this standard. In any case, this was the ethical consideration violated most frequently during the broadcasts of interest to this study.

In a preview of Carter's proposal to aid the steel industry, a subject which dominated economic news stories during the September 29-October 3 period, NBC news blatantly editorialized at the end of their report, "Administration officials acknowledge the plan is timed to help the President win votes in steel producing states, principally Pennsylvania. But by pushing up the price of foreign steel the program will add to the price of autos and other products, and make inflation worse."[11] In this instance, the day before the plan was announced, NBC news, without quoting or referring to any economic authority, declared that the program would worsen inflation.

On October 3, NBC news declared, "The Labor Department reported today good political news for President Carter" in announcing a decline in unemployment.[12] On October 24 the same network noted, "The figures for last month's consumer prices came out today and they were not good news for President Carter." The netwoek then introduced a reaction from Stuart Eizenstat as "trying to make the best of the figures," and ended the report with this editorial. "On the figures at least, Eizenstat is right. Inflation was running at 18.1 per cent at the first of the year, at an 11.6 annual rate for the second quarter, and at 7 per cent for the most recent three months despite the latest upturn. But today's figures contribute to doubt that the moderation will continue. Food prices are likely to continue to climb. Mortgage interest rates have

turned upward and oil prices seem sure to go up again."[13] The references to doubt, to food prices, to mortgage interest rates, and to oil prices were not contained in the story and were not supported by any economic authority. The network claimed no expertise in reading Eizenstat's mind to ascertain his motives.

The technique of forshadowing a quotation from a spokesperson was also evident in a September 23 report by ABC news. After noting another rise in the Consumer Price Index, the network warned, "And Robert Russell, Director of the President's Council on Wage-Price Stability, says there's more such bad news yet to come." The actual statement by Russell provided by the network was, "There's no doubt that food prices are going to be going up at fairly high rates the rest of the year, but I think we've seen the worst of it. I would expect increases of food prices of 1 per cent or less per month for the rest of this year." The story concluded with the following editorial:

> What's more, only stable housing costs helped hold down the overall Consumer Price Index last month, as a whopping 4.3 per cent drop in interest rates balanced off higher house prices. But now mortgage interest rates are on the way up again. In the future they'll make the Index look worse instead of better. That means that next month with food prices climbing fast and with little or no help from mortgage rates, the cost of living figures are likely to be in the double-digit range once more. And those figures will be the last official sign of how Mr. Carter is doing in the inflation battle before the Presidential election.[14]

The network seemed to clearly state that Carter had already lost his battle. Once again, references were made to information not contained in the story to draw conclusions about the story.

Opinion was presented as fact.

Our overall evaluation of the ethics of media framing is presented in Table 2 below:

TABLE 2

Network	# of Dual Frames	Ethical Violations
ABC	8	4
CBS	11	2
NBC	10	4

We know of no standard for determining if the above figures are high or low. Aside from providing some indication of why the CBS anchor was known as the most trusted man in America, the figures do seem acceptable given the overall record of the networks combined. On the other hand it does seem disturbing that the majority of ethical violations were to the detriment of the candidate who lost the election.

APPENDIX A

Date	ABC Econ Stories	ABC # Dual Frames	CBS Econ Stories	CBS # Dual Frames	NBC Econ Stories	NBC # Dual Frames
9/15	1	0	0	0	0	0
9/16	1	0	1	0	1	0
9/17	2	0	1	0	0	0
9/18	2	0	3	1	2	0
9/19	1	0	4	1	0	0
9/22	1	0	2	0	0	0
9/23	1	1	2	0	4	0
9/24	2	1	5	2	1	1
9/25	1	1	1	0	1	0
9/26	1	0	4	0	3	2
9/29	0	0	0	0	2	1
9/30	5	1	5	2	4	0
10/1	4	1	4	1	3	1
10/2	3	0	3	1	3	2
10/3	3	1	3	1	1	1
10/6	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/7	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/8	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/9	0	0	1	0	1	0
10/10	0	0	1	0	1	0
10/13	2	0	0	0	0	0
10/14	1	0	3	0	0	0
10/15	0	0	2	1	0	0
10/16	1	0	2	0	1	0
10/17	0	0	1	1	2	0
10/20	0	0	0	0	0	0
10/21	0	0	1	0	2	1
10/22	1	0	3	0	1	0
10/23	1	0	0	0	2	0
10/24	4	1	3	0	2	1
10/27	3	0	2	0	3	0
10/28	1	0	2	0	5	0
10/29	1	0	3	0	3	0
10/30	2	0	1	0	1	0
10/31	0	0	1	0	0	0

Endnotes

[1]See works by and about these authors in Joseph Schwartz and John A. Rycenga (eds), The Province of Rhetoric (New York: The Ronald Press, 1965), pp. 311-383.

[2]Wenmouth Williams, Jr., Mitchell Shapiro, Craig Cutbirth and William Semlak, "A Longitudinal Study of Issues and Their Impact on the 1980 Presidential Campaign," unpublished paper, Central States Speech Association, April, 1981; Wenmouth Williams, Jr., Mitchell Shapiro and Craig Cutbirth, "Setting the Agenda of Issues in the 1980 Presidential Campaign," unpublished paper, Speech Communication Association, Novenber, 1981.

[3]Murray Edelman, The Symbolic Uses of Politics (Urbana, Illinois: The University of Illinois Press, 1964), p. 6.

[4]Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media," Public Opinion Quarterly, 36 (Summer, 1972), p. 177.

[5]Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang, Politics and Television (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968), pp. 36-77.

[6]David Altheide, Creating Reality: How TV News Distorts Events (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1976),p. 7.

[7]We included only information which would have normally been given an economic frame in the absence of a presidential election campaign. A commentary from one candidate concerning the economic policies of the other was not included in our coding. A commentary from one candidate in reference to economic information was included.

[8]World News Tonight, ABC Television, September 24, 1980.

[9]The CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite, CBS Television, September 30, 1980.

[10]The Nightly News, NBC Television, September 26, 1980.

[11]The Nightly News, NBC Television, September 29, 1980.

[12]The Nightly News, NBC Television, October 3, 1980.

[13]The Nightly News, NBC Television, October 24, 1980.

[14]World News Tonight, ABC Television, September 23, 1980.